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Kennecott keeps working to contain dust

Reclamation: Efforts to establish a vegetative cover have fared better in some areas than others

By Mike Gorrell
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Kennecott reclamation specialists are looking for a few salt-tolerant plants.

Their goal: to find vegetation hardy enough to survive — and perhaps even thrive — in the highly saline waste materials of Kennecott Utah Copper Corp.'s tailings pile located at the north end of the Oquirrh Mountains. Accomplish that goal and their overall mission of limiting dust emissions from the pile will make life more pleasant for Magna residents.

Efforts during the past year to establish a dust-containing vegetative cover have fared better in some areas of the 5,700-acre pile than others, Kennecott associate environmental engineer Vicky Peacey told the Utah Board of Oil, Gas and Mining this week.

She expressed confidence that better results are in the offing, based on the positive performance of an experimental seeding device this past year and information anticipated from a "sustainable vegetation" study the company has contracted.

"Promising" was Peacey's initial analysis of "Booth Tube" technology, which injects a 6-inch plastic tube into the soil, then degrades slowly enough to give the salt-tolerant plant time to establish itself. "This is a technology we will continue to use in 2005" when more data will be available to discern how plants from greasewood to foxtail barley to various species of cheat grass respond to saline environments, she added.

Kennecott must report annually on its reclamation activities to the state regulatory board, which required the mining firm to post bonds to cover the projected costs of restoring land disturbed by a century of extracting copper and other valuable minerals from the open-pit mine.

The company spent about $1.9 million this past year on reclamation projects.

Peacey said Kennecott conducted first-time seeding on 565 acres of tailings atop the pile and reseeded another 906 acres where initial efforts met with marginal results. Nearly 20,000 tons of limestone and biosolid materials also were applied to add nutrients to the soil mix and to make it more likely that vegetation can be sustained, she said.

Besides being helpful in controlling emissions, Peacey said a vegetative cover diminishes the volume of water the company must handle after it filters through the pile, to say nothing of making the site more aesthetically palatable.

Controlling internal and external water flows and restoring habitat for wildlife also were the goals of reclamation work on several waste dump piles, some produced by mining 40 years ago, along the perimeter of the pit and beneath the road that provides access to the Bingham Canyon visitor center.

Peacey said Kennecott reclaimed about 160 acres overall in this area in the past year.

"It's hard to do more than 100 to 150 acres a year," she added, noting it makes no sense to reclaim an area if there is a chance it will be covered later with waste rock. "It's hard [for company officials] to commit, 'We'll never dump waste on this spot again.' "

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